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ABSTRACT

Since 1971, the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has been responsible for developing, field testing, and refining policies and procedures for accrediting postsecondary technical or occupational education institutions. At present, the COEI's accreditation procedure is a two-stage process consisting of intensive self-study by school-affiliated personnel to measure progress toward achieving stated objectives and onsite evaluation of the school by a visiting team of professional educators and specialists who are sometimes accompanied by laypersons. The following are among the significant quality assurance aspects of the COEI accreditation process: (1) the policies and standards used as the basis for evaluating institutions were developed and are periodically modified by occupational education specialists with expertise in all facets of such schools' operations/programs; (2) the types of personnel involved in evaluating occupational schools/programs contribute to the assurance of educational quality; (3) the procedures applied in the accreditation process emphasize qualitative assessment; (4) the evaluation focuses intensively on the processes and products of educational programs; and (5) the decision to accredit an occupational education institution is based on aggregate evidence that the institution is in compliance with COEI policies and standards. A flow-chart showing the accreditation process is included. (MN)

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Technical School Accreditation: A Model for Institutional Quality Assurance

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a view of institutional accreditation as a model for assuring educational quality in postsecondary technical schools. The subject will be addressed in three sections as follows: overview of accreditation, description of a technical school accreditation system, and aspects of accreditation to provide quality assurance. The perspective adopted for the model is the accreditation system utilized by the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (In this paper, occupational education and technical education are synonymous.)

Overview of Accreditation

Accreditation is a system to recognize educational institutions or professional programs that meet prescribed levels or standards of integrity, performance, and quality (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, 1990, p 3). From a product perspective, accreditation can be defined as a status ascribed to an institution or a program that has undergone evaluation and met stated criteria of educational quality (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 443). While accreditation may also be viewed as a process of evaluation, this view is not applicable to the present discussion. Accreditation of an institution by COEI is a recognition granted to the institution indicating that it complies

with the policies, standards, and procedures adopted by the member institutions of the Commission. Accreditation by COEI does not, however, certify that all components of an institution are of equal quality, but does indicate that none of the components is weak enough to undermine the educational effectiveness of the institution as a whole (Coulton, 1990, p. 393).

Accreditation is a private, voluntary, non-governmental, decentralized process that is unique to postsecondary education in the United States of America. In many countries, the establishment and application of educational standards are performed by a central government agency. In this country, the public authority to regulate education has been reserved to the states under the Constitution. Accreditation has evolved to promote educational quality through the identification and application of quality standards by peers in a particular sector of the education community or a specific professional field.

The accreditation status of a school is important because it may be considered in formal actions by many agencies and individuals, for example, governmental funding agencies, foundations, employers, counselors, parents, and potential students. The general public is inclined to accept accreditation as a quality assurance indicator more readily than recently devised measures (e. g., program reviews, graduate surveys, and rankings). In the view of Bogue and Saunders (1992, p. 29), accreditation is probably the most widely recognized and highly regarded form of quality assurance among constituents of American postsecondary

education. The activities and resources required to achieve and maintain accreditation are demanding and expensive in terms of personnel time and costs. These resources are well spent, however, when educational effectiveness and quality are enhanced through the accreditation process.

The COEI Accreditation System

COEI was created in 1971 as a result of a conference on occupational education that was held in April, 1967, under the sponsorship of SACS. During the ensuing four years, a committee on occupational education developed and field tested the policies, standards, and procedures that were used initially by COEI for school accreditation. Those policies, standards, and procedures have been expanded and refined over the years as the nature and variety of technical education programs have changed. A schematic depiction of the accreditation process based on COEI policies, standards, and procedures (Commission on Occupational Education Institutions, 1992) is presented in Figure 1. The major stages of the accreditation process are described briefly below.

The first stage in the accreditation process is an intensive self-study that is conducted by school-related personnel to measure progress toward achieving stated objectives. The primary focus of the self-study is on the policies and 12 standards for accreditation that have been adopted by the COEI member institutions. The policies cover many procedural and operational aspects of an institution. The standards address the following

areas: institutional mission, organization and administration, long-range planning, educational programs, staff, facilities, equipment and supplies, financial resources, learning resources, placement and follow-up, student personnel services, and community relations.

The second stage is an on-site evaluation of the school by a visiting team of professional educators and specialists, accompanied by lay persons at times. The visiting team assesses the school in reference to the COEI policies and standards as well as the institution's self-study. The team makes professional judgements about the extent of compliance with the policies and standards and may offer suggestions for the improvement of educational practices based on team members' expertise. The team submits a written report on its findings, recommendations, and suggestions to the accrediting agency which, in turn, shares the report with the school.

If the team report contains any recommendations indicating non-compliance with any policies and/or standards, the third stage in the process is the preparation and submission of a report by the school to the accrediting agency to address those recommendations. The school is expected to have eliminated the deficiencies identified in the recommendations or at least to have implemented a plan to correct the deficiencies. The response report details those actions taken by the school following the team visit to comply with the COEI policies and standards.

The final stage in the process is action by the Commission

regarding accreditation of the school. The Commission relies on the self-study, team report, and response report, if applicable, to make its decision. The action is based on the documentation that is provided to demonstrate compliance of the institution with the policies and standards of the Commission. Any adverse decision of the Commission can be appealed in accordance with procedures established by the membership. The reaffirmation of an institution's accreditation follows the same cycle and is conducted within two to six years.

Quality Assurance Aspects of COEI Accreditation

The discussion below is intended to elaborate on significant aspects of the COEI accreditation system that contribute to institutional quality assurance. Many aspects of accreditation by COEI are designed to ensure educational quality in accredited occupational/technical education institutions. Several of the more significant features of the process are discussed below.

First, the policies and standards used as the basis for evaluating COEI institutions were developed and are periodically modified by occupational education specialists with expertise in all facets of operations and programs of such schools. In addition to placing emphasis on the processes and products of educational programs, special attention is given to several factors that are essential for technical education institutions. These factors include systematic long-range planning, appropriate training equipment and materials, effective placement and follow-up

procedures (completers and non-completers), and positive relationships with the community that supplies and employs students.

Second, the types of personnel involved in the evaluation of occupational schools and programs contribute to the assurance of educational quality. School evaluation team members, who are selected by COEI from outside a school's geographic area, must have demonstrated expertise and experience related to the occupational programs offered by the institution. In addition, continuous review and evaluation of technical schools is required through the use of institutional and program advisory committees that have extensive representation of employer groups.

Third, the procedures applied in the accreditation process place emphasis on qualitative assessment of COEI institutions. The process begins with a review of an institution before it is accepted as a candidate for accreditation to assure that it meets eligibility criteria and is likely to achieve accreditation within three years. An exhaustive self-study must be conducted by institutional personnel to assess all facets of the school based on the COEI policies and standards. An on-site evaluation of the institution is performed by a team of occupational education specialists as described above. The team applies the COEI policies and standards in a qualitative assessment of the institution that is presented in a written report to the Commission. The report includes documentation of any deficiencies with respect to the policies and standards as well as recommendations for areas that

require action to alleviate the deficiencies. The institution is required to respond to each recommendation by indicating the steps taken to address the deficiencies.

Fourth, the evaluation of COEI institutions focuses intensively on the processes and products of educational programs. The on-site evaluation of an occupational school includes a thorough examination of course content (objectives and organization), student progress assessment procedures, and course completion criteria. Observation of instruction is an integral part of the evaluation. In addition, the products of educational programs are thoroughly assessed. While course performance data are useful in this regard, the evaluation depends more heavily on placement and satisfactory job performance of program completers. Placement records provide a partial assessment of program products. Interviews are conducted with program completers, employers, and school/program advisory committee members to determine the quality of the preparation provided by the technical school.

Fifth, the decision to accredit an occupational education institution is made on the basis of the aggregate evidence that the institution is in compliance with the COEI policies and standards. This decision is made by the 19 commissioners who comprise the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions. The commissioners represent various segments of the technical school community and the public who are elected by representatives of COEI member schools. The independence of the institutional evaluation and the accreditation decision contributes positively to the

assurance of educational quality in accredited institutions.

In addition to the five areas discussed above, there are additional features of COEI accreditation that are relevant to quality assurance. At the institutional level, all COEI policies and standards deal to varying degrees with the processes and procedures utilized by a technical school to achieve its mission. Such concern with processes and procedures is necessary to support long-range planning efforts, to enhance operational effectiveness and efficiency, to facilitate accountability by the institution and its personnel, to provide mechanisms for quality control, and, ultimately, to ensure protection for the institution's clients - students and employers.

At the program level, attention focuses on processes and procedures in order to monitor the learning experiences provided for students and to ensure their relevance to expected outcomes. Documentation of program processes and procedures enables an institution to substantiate its efforts to provide job-relevant preparation for its students. Furthermore, the congruence between institutional mission and educational program delivery can be demonstrated.

The overriding emphasis in the accreditation of an occupational education institution is placed on the congruence between the products of the institution and its mission. The validation of an institution's impact as assessed by its outcomes, results, or products is imperative to maintain the credibility of the accreditation process and the integrity of the institution.

The commitment of COEI to product assessment is evident in its accreditation policies and standards. Emphases are placed on the specifications of criteria for program completion, level of success in the placement of completers, and follow-up assessment of program effectiveness by completers and employers. In addition, COEI institutions must involve representatives of career fields for which students are prepared in reviewing and evaluating programs to ensure that the products of these programs (i.e., the completers) have the competencies needed for success on the job.

Both institutional processes and outcomes are addressed by the COEI policies and standards for accreditation of technical schools. Policies and standards pertaining to processes are necessary for an institution to maintain its credibility and accountability as a legitimate educational enterprise. This attention to institutional processes is applicable to both public and non-public schools. Non-public schools must give special attention to this concern because of their relative freedom to implement institutional changes.

The decision to accredit any technical school - whether public or non-public - is based ultimately on the quality of the preparation students receive for careers in technical fields. The expenditure of public or personal funds for occupational education should be made with the assurance that students who enroll in particular programs are likely to succeed in completing the programs, to secure placement in the career field, and to perform satisfactorily on the job.

Concluding Statement

Since its inception early in this century, institutional accreditation has undergone many changes in philosophy and process as refinement has occurred. The history of accreditation reveals that it has become the best known mechanism for ensuring institutional quality in this country. The view of Young and his associates captures the essence of this history: "The genius of accreditation is that it began with the impossible task of defining educational quality and in just 25 years evolved, by trial and error, into a process that advances educational quality" (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 13). Technical school accreditation performed by COEI has had a similar history since 1971 as it has evolved into an effective process to assure quality in occupational education institutions.

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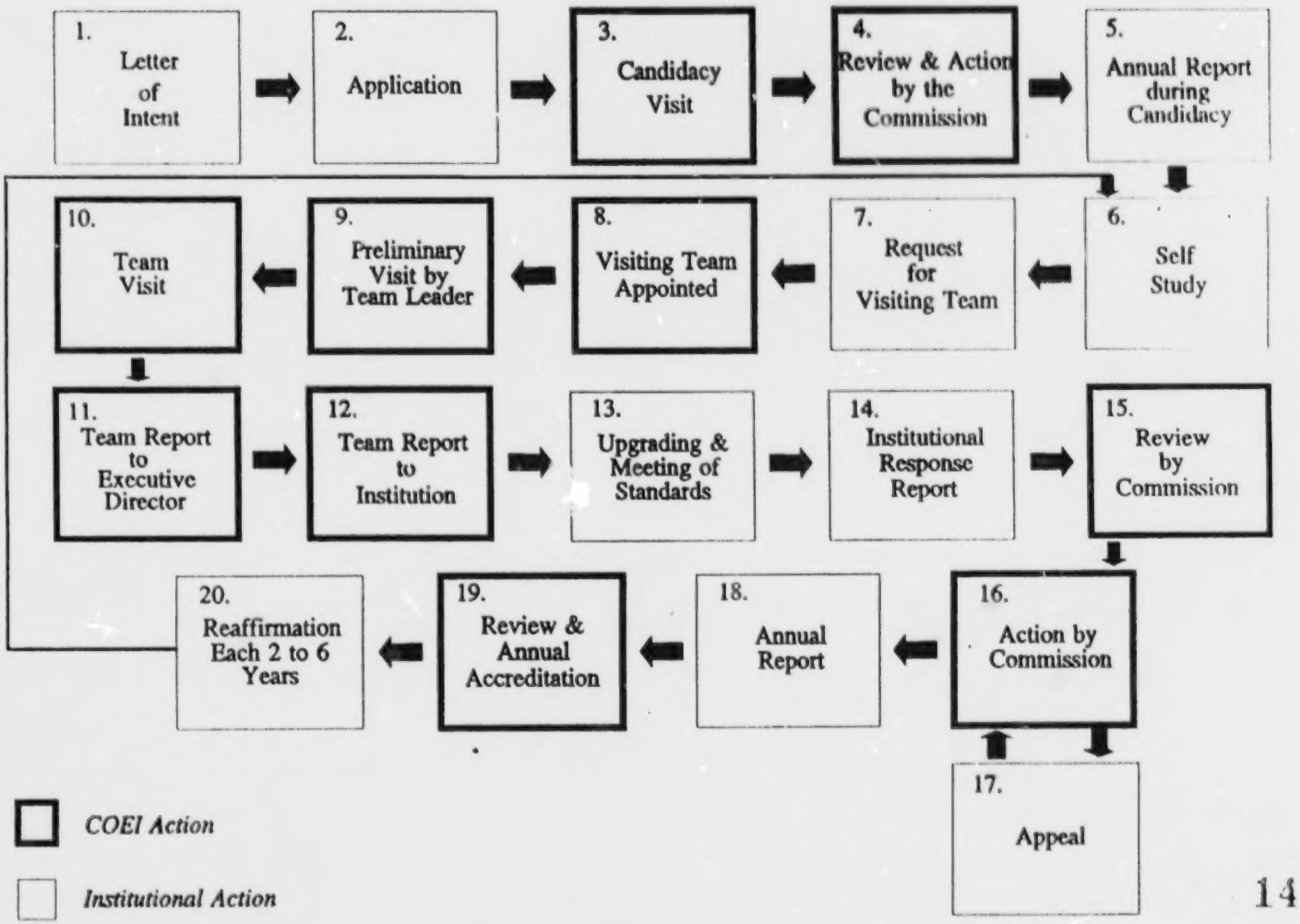
Figure 1

The Accreditation Process

Commission on Occupational Education Institutions


1. Letter of Intent
2. Application
3. Candidacy Visit
4. Review & Action by the Commission
5. Annual Report during Candidacy
6. Self Study
7. Request for Visiting Team
8. Visiting Team Appointed
9. Preliminary Visit by Team Leader
10. Team Visit
11. Team Report to Executive Director
12. Team Report to Institution
13. Upgrading & Meeting of Standards
14. Institutional Response Report
15. Review by Commission
16. Action by Commission
17. Appeal
18. Annual Report
19. Review & Annual Accreditation
20. Reaffirmation Each 2 to 6 Years
COEI Action
Institutional Action